



2nd May 2023

Opening Statement by Andrew Brownlee, SOLAS to the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government & Heritage

On behalf of SOLAS, I would like to thank the Chair and the Joint Committee Members for the opportunity to speak with you today and discuss how Further Education and Training (FET) is supporting modern methods of construction (MMC) and the Government's *Housing for All* strategy. I am joined by Tony Dalton, Director of Further Education and Training for the Laois Offaly Education and Training Board (ETB).

SOLAS has responsibility for funding, planning, and coordinating FET in Ireland. It also serves as the coordinating provider for craft apprenticeships and works with the HEA to jointly manage the National Apprenticeship Office to oversee the national apprenticeship system. Through the 16 ETBs, the FET system offers access to a wide range of learning opportunities and supports in every corner of the country, regardless of background or formal education level, and a learning pathway to take you as far as you want to go. It currently serves a base of around 200,000 unique learners every year.

More specifically, the FET sector has long played a key role in ensuring a skilled labour force for the construction sector through the delivery of targeted training programmes annually. These programmes are provided through national apprenticeship programmes, upskilling and reskilling programmes, shorter technical skills training through the Construction & Quarry Skills Certification Schemes and safety awareness training through Safe Pass, including via a recently launched online renewal system. SOLAS currently coordinates 22,470 craft apprentices and issued over 125,000 Safe Pass Cards and 21,000 CSCS\QSCS cards to individual construction workers in 2022.

As has been well flagged, the construction sector in Ireland and indeed across the world is currently experiencing a significant skills shortage. This is not only a requirement for new entrants but also in upskilling workers in the newly emerging aspects of construction such as retrofitting and modern methods of construction. In 2022, SOLAS commissioned research which provided an analysis of the skills required for residential construction and retrofitting up to 2030. The report provided key insights into the construction skills and the number of new construction workers required to deliver on the Government's *Housing for All* Action Plan. It estimated that 50,831 new entrants to the sector will be required over the period 2023 – 2030.

In response to this and the continued need to build capacity in the construction sector, SOLAS has been investing in the expansion of education and training provision in this area. Working with the National Construction Campus at Mount Lucas, ETBs, and a broad range of construction stakeholders we are enhancing our construction training infrastructure and implementing new and comprehensive construction skills pathways around:

- Modern Methods of Construction (MMC), including a Construction Assembly and Installation Operative
- Nearly Zero Energy Building (NZEB), including BER assessors, Certified Passive House Tradespersons and Retrofit Technicians
- Digital Construction Skills, including BIM

Part of the challenge is making construction careers, more appealing to young people, taking advantage of the exciting opportunities and new ways of working provided by MMC. SOLAS has supported ETBs to deliver construction-related modules and taster courses as part of transition year offerings, and we have also made available over 800 free SafePass places for TY students in ETB schools in 2023.

In support of the Government's retrofitting plan, SOLAS is establishing 6 Centres of Excellence for NZEB and Retrofitting training. To date, three CoEs (Waterford\Wexford; Laois Offaly; and Limerick) are fully operational. Cork will open on 22nd May 2023, with Sligo and Dublin coming on stream at the end of 2023. In 2022, over 2,000 received and training and certification in NZEB related interventions, with over 5,000 targeted for 2023.

In a follow-up to Action 23.9 of *Housing for All* and the decision from the Construction Industry Capability Group, Ireland's first Modern Methods of Construction (MMC) Demonstration Park will be developed in the National Construction Campus at Mount Lucas and managed by the Laois Offaly ETB.

MMC describes an approach to constructing buildings using methods such as off-site manufacturing, modular construction panels or light steel framing, structural insulated panels, or cross-laminated timber. The MMC Demonstration Park offers industry a centralised location to collaborate and examine new building methodologies. It will also offer an opportunity for industry to share best practice and align to the development of those new construction skills pathways.

In summary, FET and apprenticeships have a significant contribution to make in supporting the growth of modern methods of construction, in ensuring the future skills pipeline exists to expand construction of housing in line with *Housing for All*, and in enabling the national retrofitting programme by upskilling

workers. I would like to thank the Committee for their time today and look forward to discussing this in more detail.